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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANGKOK 005949

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SUBJECT: TRAVELS IN ISAAN - LOOKING TO PPP TO CARRY ON
THAKSIN'S LEGACY

REF: A. A. BANGKOK 5749 (ELECTION PLAYBILL)
[1](#)B. B. BANGKOK 5667 (CAMPAIGN RULES EASED)
[1](#)C. C. BANGKOK 5600 (MILITARY INTERFERENCE)
[1](#)D. D. BANGKOK 5578 (THAI ELECTION SEASON)
[1](#)E. E. BANGKOK 5482 (ELECTION DECREE ADVANCES)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. James F. Entwistle. Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Contacts in three northeastern Thailand provinces told us that voters in the poor, rural area are likely to vote for the People's Power Party and the Motherland Party as these parties are the inheritors of former Prime Minister Thaksin's legacy. Networks of local officials and vote canvassers were the most significant factor in directing votes to these parties. Local Election Commissions were preparing to try to stem vote-buying but none of our contacts believed the effort would be successful. The military was noticeably absent from the political arena and a wide-range of interlocutors told us soldiers were not present in the villages. End Summary.

TRAVELS IN THAI RAK THAI TERRITORY

[1](#)2. (U) Poloff and Pol LES traveled to the northeastern provinces of Ubon Ratchathani, Amnat Charoen and Yasothon November 13-15 to discuss political sentiment with local contacts in the lead up to the December 23 general election. All three provinces were strongholds of support for former PM Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party and are among nineteen northeastern provinces that are commonly referred to in Thai as "Isaan." (For further background on these provinces see paragraphs 29-30.)

THE MAIN EVENT: PPP VERSUS THE MOTHERLAND

[1](#)3. (C) Many contacts expect the People's Power Party (PPP), which includes many former TRT politicians, to do well in the region in the December 23 general election and predict that the Motherland Party would be PPP's main competition for votes. The regional Thai Rath newspaper reporter told us local voters like PPP's candidates because they had proven during their time with TRT that they would follow through on campaign promises and help the people of Isaan. TRT policies such as the thirty-baht health care program, the one-million-baht-per village fund, and legalizing the underground lottery had positively affected the lives of Ubon residents.

14. (C) Despite PPP popularity in Isaan, Motherland Party candidates were cleaner than PPP candidates, the Thai Rath reporter said. The Democrat Party candidates in Isaan did nothing but throw mud or engage in corruption. As an example, the reporter said a local Democrat Party candidate had influenced expenditure of the provincial budget to repave an already good road and Ubon voters had decided that the candidate was not interested in helping local people.

15. (C) In Amnat Charoen, the campaign manager for a PPP candidate told us that Motherland Party candidates included several former TRT MPs who maintained strong name recognition among the people. PPP would prevail, however, because the party had entirely adopted Thaksin's policies, the aide said. Former TRT MPs had split between PPP and the Motherland party because they have different working styles and visions for the future of their parties. PPP wants to continue the policies of TRT while the Motherland candidates want to rejoin the "old Thai political game," the aide said. The Motherland Party was tainted in the campaign manager's opinion because General (Ret.) Pallop Pinmanee had joined the party as an advisor. (Note: Pallop is a controversial hardliner who many see as having close ties to General (Ret.) Sonthi Boonyaratglin. End note.)

16. (C) The Motherland Party is showing surprising strength for a newly-formed party. Several contacts pointed to the Motherland Party as having support from someone above the military. (Note: We understood this assertion to be a reference to President of the Privy Council General (Ret.) Prem Thinsulanonda. End note.) Suthat Ngoenmuen, Democrat Party list candidate in Isaan, told us that despite the fact that many former TRT MPs had joined the Motherland Party,

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people in Amnat Charoen view the party as having been approved by someone "from above."

17. (C) We met with Ronrittichai Khanket, Motherland Party candidate for Yasothon and former TRT MP, while fellow Motherland candidate Suttichai Chan-arak was speaking to a gathering of villagers at a temple in Naso village in Yasothon province. In striking contrast to the visibly poor villagers, campaign staff for the Motherland candidates wore fashionable clothes and their smooth appearance stood out against the farmer's sun-worn faces. While Suttichai energetically praised Thaksin and strongly criticized the Democrat Party for helping bring down the former PM, Ronrittichai told us that he had chosen to join the Motherland Party because Samak Sundaravej, PPP party leader, did not respect Isaan people and had not proposed any policies that would help the region. The Matchima Thippathai Party was tainted because Prachai Leophairatana, the party leader, was anti-Thaksin, Ronrittichai said. The Motherland Party was the only party that would carry on TRT policies to help Isaan because Suwit Khunkitti, its leader, was from the region. Ronrittichai told us his party would immediately push for immunity for the 111 disqualified former TRT executives and for the return of Thaksin to fight his court case if Motherland was in the next government. (Comment: This Motherland candidate seems more openly pro-Thaksin than the standard Motherland position. End Comment.)

BANHARN AS PM?

18. (C) Non-PPP contacts consistently criticized PPP's Samak and none predicted that he would become the next Prime Minister. Motherland Party candidate Ronrittichai admitted that his party would not win enough seats to form the next government but he predicted that Motherland would join Chart Thai and PPP in the next government. Chart Thai leader Banharn Silapa-Archa would become PM despite his promise he would never join forces with Samak, Ronrittichai said. Three leaders of the Amnat Charoen Teachers Association told us that people in Amnat Charoen supported PPP but did not like

Samak or see him as qualified to be the next PM. The teachers predicted that Chart Thai would join PPP to form the next government with Banharn as PM because he is more acceptable to people in Isaan.

¶9. (C) Democrat candidate Suthat gave us his prediction for the coming election. He forecast that PPP would win 220-230 seats, the Democrat Party 130, the Motherland Party 40-50, Chart Thai 40-50, and Matchima Thippathai 20. Suthat predicted that Chart Thai, and perhaps the Motherland Party, would join PPP in a coalition with Banharn as Prime Minister.

DEMOCRATS DOWN ON THEIR LUCK

¶10. (C) All of our interlocutors gave the Democrat Party little chance for success in Isaan. Suthat told us that the party would struggle to improve on the results of the last election when the party won only two constituency seats in the region and he predicted winning party list seats would be difficult. He predicted that well over 300,000 party list votes would be needed in Isaan to win even one party list seat. The Democrat Party had received only 290,000 votes from Isaan in the 2005 election, according to Suthat. In a direct reference to former TRT MPs, Suthat said "old power" politicians were likely to do the best because personalities were more important in Isaan than policies or national party leaders. Motherland Party candidates would do well in provinces such as Ubon and Yasothon even though the party leader, Suwit Khunkitti, is not well-liked. Suthat said the Democrat Party would suffer because the Party lacked quality local politicians even though Abhisit Vejjajiva was well-qualified to be PM. Suthat expressed frustration with the Democrat Party's economic team. He opined that Abhisit's advisors only promoted the party leader's honesty and qualifications but had not focused on policies to help the people in rural areas such as Isaan.

¶11. (C) Even the traditional Democrat Party stronghold in the South was no longer safe according to Suthat. The Democrats could not campaign as being anti-Thaksin as they had in the 2005 election and now southerners may not respond to the Democrat Party as it may be seen as too supportive of the

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central government, Suthat explained.

MATCHIMA THIPPATHAI TRYING POPULISM TO GARNER SUPPORT

¶12. (C) Our contacts rarely mentioned the Matchima Thippathai Party, led by ardent Thaksin foe and businessman Prachai Leophairatana, as a serious competitor to PPP or the Motherland Party. Despite this, Yasothon Matchima candidate Sombun Thongburan, a former Senator and MP, said he thought Matchima's populist policies would attract voters. Policies such as sizeable agriculture subsidies, social welfare programs for the elderly, pay increases for public officials, large-scale construction projects, and free education for all would help Isaan and attract voters, Sombun said. When asked how the RTG would pay for these programs, Sombun said that Thailand should use its foreign reserves, currently about eighty billion dollars, to pay for the programs.

¶13. (C) In comparing leading parties, Sombun said Matchima is in a good position to do well because Samak is corrupt and Abhisit is inexperienced. Matchima Prachai was an attractive leader because, as a former businessman, he would be a capable economic leader, Sombun asserted. (Note: Prachai was the owner of Thai Petrochemical Industry that went bankrupt during the Asian financial crisis. Many rumors point to Prachai's desire to lead the Finance Ministry in order to win back the company from government control. End Note.)

ECT "TRYING TO SWAT GNATS"

¶14. (C) In describing the National Election Commission's (ECT) rules for the election campaign, the Chairman of the Ubon Election Commission (EC) Monthai Pramunchakko modified a Thai idiom in saying the ECT was "trying to ride an elephant in order to catch a gnat" as an indication of why the new rules would be difficult to carry out. To help candidates understand and follow the new rules, the Ubon EC would conduct a seminar for all candidates in Ubon. Monthai predicted that post-election rulings by the ECT would have a significant impact on election results.

VOTE-BUYING PERVASIVE

¶15. (C) The Ubon EC, under direction of the ECT, would focus on suppressing vote-buying during the coming election campaign, Monthai explained. This would be difficult to do however, as vote-buying is now more complicated and less open than in the past. For example, canvassers would no longer attempt to give money to voters with candidate identification numbers attached. Monthai said politicians would now help a canvasser purchase a car and then help to cancel the debt on the vehicle if the candidate was elected. Vote-buying was so prevalent that no candidate would be elected if they abstained from the practice, Monthai said.

¶16. (C) Journalist contacts painted a very similar picture on vote buying. The Thai Rath newspaper reporter said vote-buying could not be immediately solved and echoed EC Chairman Monthai's statement that all parties buy votes. The reporter described a recent election for local offices in which the losing candidate had spent 400 baht per person to buy votes but had been beaten by a candidate who had spent 200 baht per vote. A local radio journalist said politicians had bought votes before the election laws had been promulgated in order to avoid being subject to the law. The Democrat Party tried the hardest to buy votes but PPP and the Motherland Party controlled the key canvassers who would bring home the votes. The journalist said that rumors pointed to canvassers having coordinated to buy votes to elect PPP and Motherland candidates as well as Dr. Nirun Pitakwatchara, a Matchima Thippathai candidate and former Senator, even though he had renounced vote-buying. The canvassers were coordinating to buy votes for Nirun because he was a well-respected activist who had greatly helped local people, according to the journalist.

¶17. (C) Leaders of the Yasothon Network for Alternative Agriculture told us that the culture of vote-buying was not one that would easily go away. The current ECT focus on the problem was misplaced as votes had been bought before the election laws had been drafted.

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¶18. (C) Academic contacts also maintained that vote-buying was prevalent. Members of the Faculty of Political Science at Ubon Ratchatani University said canvassers maintained important influence as they controlled local administrators who could direct villagers how to vote. The faculty members explained that that even though villagers liked TRT policies, the real reason they would vote for PPP in the coming election was by the order of village officials.

¶19. (C) Democrat candidate Suthat said that the three things needed in order to win the election were policy, personality, and money. Good policy and personality were not sufficient though, as a candidate still needed money. Suthat criticized the provincial ECs as doing nothing to educate people on the need to rise above the vote-buying system.

REPORTS OF SOLDIER INTIMIDATION DOUBTED

¶20. (C) Most of our interlocutors rejected a claim by PPP

leader Samak that a soldier had pointed a gun at the head of an aide to Chaishe Keela, a PPP candidate in Amnat Charoen. Despite this skepticism, Chaishe's campaign manager told us the incident had occurred 200 meters from the residence where we met. According to the campaign manager, Chaishe's personal secretary had been driving November 2 on a side road when five armed soldiers stopped his car and one of the soldiers pointed a gun at the personal secretary's head but he had escaped by running away. The campaign aide said the personal secretary had not seen the soldiers before and did not know where the soldiers were based or where they lived. The aide said the campaign had reported the incident to make sure the police were aware of what happened, not to defame the Thai Army.

121. (C) Seventy to eighty soldiers are staying in villages near where we met, the aide said, but he was unable to identify which villages or in what residences they were staying. He suggested that local village leaders might be able to provide better information regarding military activities. We stopped in several villages in the area of the reported incident to ask if soldiers were present but villagers reported that they had not seen any soldiers.

122. (C) Members of the Amnat Charoen Provincial Administration Organization (PAO), told us that political environment in Amnat was quiet. PAO members said they had heard nothing to substantiate the report of a soldier pointing the gun at the advisor to Chaishe. The only effect of a military presence was a requirement for the PAO to report training activities, such as public health seminars, to the local Internal Security Operations Command. As most villagers wanted PPP to win, the Army could not influence their voting choices, the PAO members said.

123. (C) Amnat Charoen Teachers Association leaders told us that reports of soldier intimidation had taken them by surprise. They doubted the veracity of the story as the person who made the claim was not well-known and people in villages had not had any experience with soldiers trying to influence the election.

124. (C) Farmers from the Yasothon Network for Alternative Agriculture said there was no sign of soldiers in the villages in Yasothon. The farmers also doubted the report of intimidation in Amnat Charoen, saying it would be stupid if the military tried to influence the election by intimidation or other means.

125. (C) As for military's impact on the election, the local Thai Rath reporter told us that impact would be negligible because voters did not care about any attempt to influence their votes. Any attempt by the Army to sway voters would backfire because voters would then try to insure that PPP had a majority of the seats in the next parliament. The reporter and Ubon EC Chairman Monthai's both told us that the Army had tried to force the ECT to accept Army soldiers as provincial EC commissioners but that Army Commander in Chief General Anupong Paochinda had reversed this effort.

LINGERING LEGACY OF THAKSIN'S POLICIES

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126. (C) The Yasothon farmers told us that villagers in Isaan benefited greatly under the Thaksin administration and would vote for candidates who were former TRT members no matter what party they now represented. The farmers expressed frustration with the lack of political power of Thai farmers. Past Thai governments had not tried to alleviate the troubles of poor villagers in Isaan. Thaksin, on the other hand, had promised to help them and lived up to his promises, the farmers said.

127. (C) Many contacts said that even though the benefits of

the Thaksin's health care and debt programs were many, the one-million-baht-per village fund had created problems. The Yasothon farmers said villagers were trying to find ways to pay back debt they owed from borrowing money from village fund. Eighty percent of the people who borrowed from the program used the money for non-productive projects such as consumer purchases and villagers were now trying to find a way to pay back the money, the farmers said. The Amnat Charoen PAO members told us that the village fund had complicated the organization's work because many in the province were now in debt with no apparent way to repay. (Note: According to RTG statistics household debt in Amnat Charoen is the highest in Isaan. End Note.) The PAO representatives said villagers had used the village fund primarily for personal consumption and not for projects that would lead to increased income. With debt repayment difficult, the PAO had focused efforts on job creation to provide local people with the means to pay off debts without going to private loan sharks.

COMMENT

¶28. (C) The predictions by contacts in Ubon, Amnat Charoen, and Yasothon that PPP and the Motherland Party would sweep most of the constituency seats in Isaan mirror those by other analysts. Although PPP still seems poised to have the first chance to form the next government, there appeared to be emergent opinion in Isaan that Samak would not be acceptable as Prime Minister while Banharn, a politician always looking for an opportunity to benefit personally, could well become the next Prime Minister. With many press reports of attempts by the military to educate villagers on "correct choices" in the coming election, we were impressed that our contacts almost universally dismissed reports of military activity. If the Army is going "back to the barracks" in Isaan, it may reflect the views of the Army Commander-in-Chief General Anupong, who has said he wished to distance the Army from politics. We will continue to monitor reports of military intervention in the election process.

BACKGROUND

¶29. (U) Ubon Ratchathani has the fourth largest number of voters in the country and will seat eleven members in the next parliament. Fifty percent of Ubon voters supported candidates from deposed PM Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in the 2005 parliamentary election and fifty-six percent voted against the constitution in the August referendum. Ubon was visibly well-off when viewed in comparison with Amnat Charoen and Yasothon provinces.

¶30. (U) Amnat Charoen, reliant on agriculture, became a province in 1993 when separated from Ubon. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Thailand Human Development Report 2007 ranked Amnat Charoen sixty-fourth out of Thailand's seventy-six provinces in an index of income. Amnat will seat two members in the next parliament. In Amnat, forty-eight percent of voters supported candidates from TRT in the 2005 parliamentary election and fifty-two percent voted against the constitution in the August referendum.

¶31. (U) Agriculture also dominates economic activity in Yasothon and the UNDP report placed the province at sixty-third in the income ranking. In Yasothon, TRT candidates received sixty percent of the vote in the 2005 parliamentary election and seventy percent voted against the constitution in the August referendum.

ENTWISTLE